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IRÈNE NÉMIROVSKY'S *SUITE FRANÇAISE* AND THE CRISIS OF RIGHTS AND IDENTITY

by Christopher Lloyd

My purpose is to examine recently published literary representations of the defeat and occupation of France during the Second World War. In particular, I shall focus on studying those areas where fictional and historical writing intersect, or rather those areas that are historically significant but fall within the remit of the novelist rather than the historian (since imaginative reconstruction replaces or complements factual documentation). For example, what could be called generally the texture of daily living and personal experience under extreme conditions, or more specifically the ways in which the crisis of personal and national identity following military defeat and the abrogation of republican rights under the Vichy regime forced ordinary individuals to redefine their relationship to civil society and the polity in France. The works chosen (Némirovsky's *Suite française*, published posthumously in 2004; Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*, 1997; Pierre Assouline's *Lutetia*, 2005) focus respectively on social injustice and class conflict, antisemitic persecution, and the re-integration of survivors. Given her status both as a writer and a first-hand observer of wartime France, I shall concentrate principally on Némirovsky's work and legacy, referring to Modiano and Assouline in order to provide some concluding points of comparison.

Although it is misleading to call these three writers unofficial historians, they nevertheless assign themselves an ethical function, as guardians of memory who assert the tragic consequences of the neglect or abuse of rights by state organisms that claim mendaciously to be defending them. They tacitly assert, in other words, that the literary novelist should be neither a facile entertainer nor an abstruse

experimenter, but a witness or chronicler for future generations. In this respect, the rediscovery of Irène Némirovsky in 2004–06 as a victim of French complicity in genocide is arguably as significant as the posthumous publication of her incomplete novel *Suite française* (which offers a panoramic account of the fall of France in 1940 and life in the early years of German occupation, but elides both Jewish identity and the author's own fate). Némirovsky's career demonstrates the ambiguous legacy of the Vichy years, both culturally and ideologically. In terms of memory and the transmission of historical knowledge, it forces us to consider how the horrors of a tragic past continue to haunt the present; more specifically, in terms of cultural transmission and influence, it shows how a forgotten figure can retrospectively be imbued with significance. Under Némirovsky's status as a martyr to antisemitic persecution, one can also discern more troubling complexities about French and Jewish identity. Although she wrote and published prolifically in French and enjoyed a rather privileged existence as the daughter and wife of wealthy bankers, her assimilation into the French bourgeoisie proved more apparent than real, since she failed to acquire French nationality. Her belated conversion to Catholicism and her disavowal or criticism of Jewish immigrants have led some critics to accuse her of adopting antisemitic stereotypes, thereby ironically betraying her own origins.

In the broadest sense, the theme of the three writers under consideration is how the French state and its agents betray the most vulnerable members of society in their capitulation to the Nazis, and thereby also betray the humane values that are supposedly enshrined in the ideal of the republic. As has often been observed, the Vichy regime replaced the universalist ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity with the circumscribed obligations of work, family, and fatherland (which in practice meant allowing the Germans to disrupt families and to occupy the fatherland, and working for their benefit as conscripted labor). Robert Gildea has discerned four founding myths behind the French republic: that of universal education and equality of opportunity; that of equality of all citizens under the law; that of a unitary state, articulating the will of the sovereign people; that of the French nation as a body of citizens conjoined by a social

contract that guaranteed the rights of man. As he observes, these principles always “disguised, and were intended to disguise, radical inequalities” (110). Yet while historians now regard with suspicion the notion that the Vichy regime was an aberrant phenomenon and note the many continuities between the government of occupied France and its predecessors and successors (such as the xenophobic measures adopted in the late 1930s or the continuation of technocratic bureaucracy into the 1950s), the fact remains that Maréchal Pétain’s government was unique in explicitly rejecting these founding principles in favor of a counter-revolutionary agenda.

Arguing for the republican origins of Vichy, Gérard Noiriel notes that tens of thousands of immigrants were expelled from France in the 1930s, including some with French wives and children, and asserts that such political and economic expediency helped legitimize Vichy’s subsequent institutionalization of discriminatory practices based on so-called national preference. Similarly, he observes that certain civic rights were withdrawn from naturalized French citizens in the pre-war years, such discrimination based on origins evidently overturning the notion of the equality of all citizens. Some 15,000 people were subsequently stripped of citizenship by Pétain’s regime (although this represented only 1.66% of the 900,000 individuals awarded French nationality since 1927). However, Noiriel concedes that the infamous statutes and associated legislation on the Jews under Vichy introduced new criteria based on race or religion, legally enshrining for the first time the notion that Jews could never be assimilated into the nation (Noiriel).¹ National identity was reaffirmed by the forcible exclusion of “groups defined as outside the national, racial or ideological collectivity,” as Vichy became a willing accomplice in the final solution. Paradoxically, “the numerous assimilated and converted Jews of Europe were forced by the Nazis to regain the Jewish identity they had relinquished, often just before being murdered for what they believed they no longer were” (Bartov 7, 144). Public opinion in France generally saw foreign Jews not as victims of persecution but as an intolerable burden on a defeated country; by February 1941, 40,000 were detained in camps, “dans une indifférence quasi générale” (Grynberg 11). On 4 July 1942,

the Government agreed to the deportation of foreign Jews from both occupied and unoccupied zones. Though perceived as an alien body, as Anne Grynberg remarks, "Les Juifs installés en France forment [. . .] un group hétérogène, en proie à des dissensions internes sources d'incompréhension sinon d'hostilité." Most French Jews had little in common with foreigners, and resented being associated with them (102, 346). By progressively stripping them of their civic rights, however, the regime effectively equated them with the foreigners they despised.

Irène Némirovsky's tragic destiny chillingly illustrates statistics and concepts whose consequences largely failed to enter the public consciousness after the war, when "the fate during the occupation of those whom Vichy defined as foreign came in for very little overt comment at all" (Adler 70).² Her death in Auschwitz in August 1942 at the age of thirty-nine marked not merely her personal extinction but also the brutal termination of a promising literary career. She was born in Kiev in 1903, where her father was a prosperous Jewish banker; after the revolution, the family fled to Finland and eventually emigrated to France in 1919. Némirovsky obtained a *licence ès lettres* from the Sorbonne and married a wealthy Jewish banker of Russian origin, Michel Epstein, in 1926. Their children Denise and Élisabeth were born in 1929 and 1937 respectively. The family had little association either with other Russian refugees or with Jewish groups, mixing instead with the upper echelons of the French bourgeoisie. Even during the Occupation, they maintained an opulent lifestyle with a retinue of servants. They requested French nationality only in November 1938 (although would have been eligible to apply in the early 1920s), but their request never received any official acknowledgment; they were baptized as Catholics in February 1939.

Némirovsky's resurrection as an important literary figure in 2004 demonstrates some of the tortured complexities of what the historian Henry Rousso has famously characterized as the "Vichy syndrome" or a past that refuses to go away (Rousso; Conan and Rousso). Rousso argues that France's guilty conscience about its

shameful defeat and occupation by the Germans created an enduring trauma after the Liberation, revealed by a cluster of symptoms that affected political, social, and cultural life in the post-war decades. He breaks down this collective malady into four main phases: periods of mourning and denial running from 1944 to 1971, typified by a compensatory and excessive glorification of resistance, followed by a belated return of the repressed in the early 1970s, and an ongoing period of obsessive interest in the crimes and betrayals committed in the name of collaboration and the French state (illustrated most horrifically by the deportation of some 76,000 Jews from France). Despite the persuasive brilliance of Rousso's analysis (perhaps most effective in his dissection of the historical contortions committed by politicians, lawyers, and judges in their attempts to minimize the misdemeanors of the wartime French government and its supporters), it is unfortunate that his central metaphor suggests that continuing to engage in the present with the occupation years is somehow pathological or akin to a protracted psychotherapy session with little chance of a cure.

In the case of Némirovsky, for example, one might argue that the success of *Suite française* (which was controversially awarded the Prix Renaudot in 2004, to the indignation of at least one member of the jury, since the prize is normally given to living authors) represents the tardy recognition of the vile treatment endured by the author and her peers, a sort of apologetic expression of French national guilt. Yet it seems bizarre to imply that post-war generations have somehow inherited responsibility for atrocities committed before they were born; nor does such a dubious psychological interpretation explain the novel's success in the many translated versions published outside France. It is more plausible to suggest that twenty-first century readers have a perfectly healthy interest in discovering the tragic dramas of recent history as well as a praiseworthy appetite for well-written and accessible novels that have a serious moral and historical purpose. *Suite française* also benefited from a skillful marketing campaign in France and elsewhere. In the UK, for instance, where novels translated from foreign languages largely pass unnoticed and books about wartime France are rarely

reviewed outside specialized journals, the translation of *Suite française* was widely reviewed in the daily and weekly press (to almost universal acclaim), featured briefly in the hardback bestseller lists, and was even serialized on BBC radio.

Inevitably, perhaps, many reviewers in France and the UK devoted as much attention to Némirovsky's tragic case as a victim of Vichy and the Nazis, and to the miraculous survival of her manuscript, as to the contents and merits of *Suite française* as a novel or fictional documentary. For French commentators, her case raises questions of national responsibility and guilt; whereas for British and other foreign commentators, one suspects, her fate offers a pretext for rehearsing familiar Francophobic prejudices. Hence the *Sunday Times* headline "Auschwitz novelist stirs French guilt" (February 26, 2006), while for René de Ceccatty, writing in *Le Monde* (September 30, 2004), her fate "occupera longtemps la mauvaise conscience française." For Pascal Bruckner (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 21, 2004) "L'histoire de cet inédit est presque aussi fascinante que le livre lui-même." But Bruckner notes too how the novel reveals the French as being as much at war among themselves as with the Germans, in a "Téléscopage brutal du désastre et des destins individuels." Ceccatty observes that Némirovsky "détestait toute conduite commandée par l'appartenance à une classe, à une collectivité." Both Ceccatty and Emilie Bickerton discern "an underlying cynicism which eventually hinders our engagement with the fiction" (*Times Literary Supplement*, March 10, 2006), though Bruckner stresses her suspension of overt critical judgment and her empathy with human weakness.³

I attended a lecture at the Institut Français in London on March 9, 2006, given to promote the English translation by Denise Epstein, Némirovsky's elder daughter and the editor of the novel. Having feared this would be an embarrassing or alienating occasion, I can report that, despite my initial skepticism and one or two farcical moments, it actually proved a memorable and moving experience, creating a rare sense of a collective emotional communion with the past. The audience of several hundred Francophones included both

schoolchildren and Holocaust survivors. One elderly gentleman told Denise Epstein that he too had lost most of his family in the genocide of the Jews; such was his emotion that he was barely able to articulate audibly, and he seemed under the impression that the seventy-six-year-old Denise Epstein was actually Irène Némirovsky herself. Since *Suite française* owes its publication literally to Némirovsky's daughters' preservation of the manuscript, he was not entirely mistaken. The book survived in a typescript and notes kept in a suitcase for over half a century, until Denise Epstein, increasingly conscious of her own and her younger sister's mortality, decided to transcribe it and finally to have it published by Denoël (an odd choice, given this publisher's avowed anti-Semitism during the Occupation).

Flaubert remarked that pathos and irony are not mutually exclusive, but can reinforce each other. Commentators trying to situate Némirovsky in a wider literary tradition have seen her as a Balzacian or Flaubertian novelist, in the sense that she wrote novels of manners based on close observation of social interaction and the clash of characters, using what David Coward calls Flaubert's "indirect method," that is "masking the authorial voice and showing character and action as active not reported drama" (Coward 21).⁴ While *Suite française* strives to allow an empathetic involvement with many of its more fully drawn characters, this does not preclude an ironic detachment from them; in other words, the reader is engaged by their plight but not necessarily inclined to view their conduct as other than egotistical, foolish, or reprehensible. Némirovsky's intentions are made more explicit in some of the observations she recorded while writing the novel: for example, "Mon Dieu! Que me fait ce pays? Puisqu'il me rejette, considérons-le froidement, regardons-le perdre son honneur et sa vie" (395). The book can thus be considered primarily as an act of vengeance for the writer's exclusion (and eventual total elimination) from her adopted society.

Given her ambition to chronicle both the defeat of 1940 and the subsequent years of occupation through a wide range of interlinked characters in diverse milieux, Némirovsky's omission of any refer-

ence to Jews and antisemitic persecution in the novel seems decidedly odd. No doubt one can surmise that her sense of humiliation and despair were too great for her to be able to address what was evidently a deeply personal issue: that is, her stigmatized condition as an internal exile in the occupied zone, branded as a stateless Jew liable to detention and deportation, despite her conversion to Catholicism, many years of residence in France, and prestige as a French writer. Writing about invented characters seen with a sort of amused disdain allowed her temporarily to escape her own sense of entrapment. Nor is the book about the political or historical issues that generally feature in historians' accounts of the Occupation. Rather, she sought to portray "Beaucoup moins les attentats et les otages fusillés que la profonde indifférence des gens" (398). She observed too that "Il y a un abîme profond entre cette caste qui est celle de nos dirigeants actuels et le reste de la Nation. Les autres Français, possédant moins, ont moins peur" (396). Although wealthy characters do feature, most have little chance to exercise power in the episodes that were written. But since the novel makes much of the clash of personalities seen as representative of conflicting classes and groups, it is certainly political insofar as it offers a caustic analysis of a society whose values and certainties are on the point of collapse. As Némirovsky noted, "Malgré tout, ce qui relie tous ces êtres entre eux c'est l'époque, uniquement l'époque. Est-ce assez? Je veux dire: est-ce que ce lien se sent suffisamment?" (401).

Suite française was planned to be a *roman-fleuve* with five parts, extending from the fall of France to the eventual restoration of peace. Characters whom we see leading quite separate existences in the two parts that Némirovsky completed before her arrest in July 1942 were meant subsequently to come together, some finding fulfillment in resistance, others seeking profit from collaboration. The main problem with the book in its unfinished state (as Némirovsky's notes to herself suggest) is the lack of plausible connection both between the two parts and between the diverse characters and episodes that constitute the first part, "Tempête en juin." A further problem, given the book's aspirations to be a representative chronicle of French society, is that its dominant figures are "souvent des person-

nages trop haut placés" (398). The author is evidently more at ease with characters drawn from the bourgeoisie and notables than she is with workers and peasants (although one brief chapter is written with rather adroit naturalism from the perspective of a cat). While the worldly novelist Gabriel Corte proffers the view that "Un roman doit ressembler à une rue pleine d'inconnus où passent deux ou trois êtres, pas davantage, que l'on connaît à fond" (42), nearly all the characters we meet in "Tempête en juin" remain only passing acquaintances.

Although one could pursue these reservations about the book's form and construction, in this context it is more fruitful to draw attention to its immense documentary interest as a record of events and behavior in time of war. In his recent book on life under the Occupation, the British historian, Richard Vinen, notes that post-war academic histories have tended to neglect social issues in wartime France; for example, "the *exode* is probably recalled now more often in works of fiction than of fact." Hence, one can understand his own choice to focus on refugees and prisoners rather than military campaigns and high politics, drawing frequently on autobiographical accounts and referring to fiction (Vinen 43).⁵ In a more detailed study of the fall of France, Julian Jackson also makes use of autobiographical texts that communicate personal experience, while arguing however that the debacle of 1940 remains a taboo area in France. It has perhaps been sidelined because of the dominating presence of the "Vichy syndrome": Jackson points out that in fact relatively few novels or films have been produced about the debacle, "an event too painful to contemplate" (232).⁶ While *Suite française* thus fills a significant gap, as a rare example of a near-contemporaneous fictionalized account, it is of course descriptive rather than analytical: the novelist re-creates an imagined version of historical events in order to show behavior meant to be seen as typical, rather than trying to grasp underlying causes in the fashion of historians like Jackson or Marc Bloch in his polemical essay on *L'Étrange Défaite*.

The first part of *Suite française* recounts scenes from the fall of France and mass exodus of civilians in June 1940, while the second focuses on the inhabitants of a village occupied by the Germans following the armistice. Némirovsky concentrates on four groups of loosely associated characters, while also attempting to convey a wider feeling of a nation under siege. Three of these four groups belong to the wealthy bourgeoisie (the extended Péricand family, the writer, Gabriel Corte, and the effete collector, Charles Langelet); the fourth centers on the humbler bank employees, Maurice and Jeanne Michaud and their soldier son, Jean-Marie. As a general rule, the more privileged the character's pre-war existence, the more odious or egotistical his or her actions prove to be during the crisis. Far from being suspended or replaced by national solidarity, social divisions and injustices are acerbated as disorder reigns. A few individuals display patriotism, heroism or altruism, but they are exceptional, and their devotion may be futile. The refugees fleeing before the German advance in irrational panic (irrational because they have no good reason to flee since danger lies everywhere) are seen as "Cette multitude misérable [qui] n'avait plus rien d'humain; elle ressemblait à un troupeau en déroute" (74). The Michauds join in the flight, but eventually are forced back home to Paris and peremptorily dismissed by the bank's director. Hence Mme Michaud's lament that, unlike the rich or the workers, the lower middle classes always suffer most: "Nous sommes toujours écrasés! [. . .] Nous payons pour toutes les fautes. Bien sûr, on ne nous craint pas, nous!" (204).

The author Corte proves to be "une créature faible et méprisable" during the debacle (or so his mistress, Florence, decides [90]); to reinforce the point, he is easily robbed of his basket of provisions. The narrative switches briefly to the lower-class robbers, then drops them, having further stressed the notion that the class war is intensified as the nation heads towards military defeat and political collapse. Nevertheless, Corte and Florence finally resume their pampered existence in a luxury hotel, complacently observing others' misery. Typically, the Comte de Furières avoids becoming a prisoner of war, unlike his loyal chauffeur. But not all members of the richer classes escape unscathed or cover themselves with dishonor. Some charac-

ters are dispatched with a rather willful black humor: Langelet also makes it back to Paris (after having stolen a trusting young couple's gasoline), only to be hit and killed in the blackout by a speeding car. Tasked with guiding a group of delinquent boys to safety, the naïve but saintly priest Philippe Péricand catches them burgling a deserted chateau. When he attempts to restrain them, they murder him: "Ils étaient ivres, ils dansaient autour du prêtre étendu, ils chantaient et criaient" (171). He is thrown in the pond, dragged down in the mud, loses an eye as they stone him, and drowns. This gratuitous and unexpected killing – as adolescent resentment and cupidity turn into homicidal frenzy and the criminal classes take their revenge on a sympathetic authority figure – is the most shocking incident in the book. Although Némirovsky draws no explicit moral from this event, we can deduce that the best will perish as the worst revel in lawlessness; the martyred priest could be taken as an allegory for the destruction of France's Christian values.⁷

Disgusted with the poltroonery of his elders, Philippe's younger brother Hubert abandons the fleeing Péricand clan in an abortive attempt to join the army in its last-ditch stand against the invaders; he fails to perish in battle, but does succeed in losing his virginity (thanks to the glamorous driver of the car that kills Langelet), and in drawing some unflattering conclusions about the behavior of his compatriots during the debacle:

Et dire que personne ne le saura, qu'il y aura
autour de ça une telle conspiration de mensonges
que l'on en fera encore une page glorieuse de
l'Histoire de France. On se battra les flancs pour
trouver des actes de dévouement, d'héroïsme.
Bon Dieu! Ce que j'ai vu, moi! Les portes closes
où l'on frappait en vain pour obtenir un verre
d'eau, et ces réfugiés qui pillaient les maisons;
partout, de haut en bas, le désordre, la lâcheté, la
vanité, l'ignorance! (180)

Némirovsky gives us no reason to demur from this judgment. Her novel is a forceful example of demystifying history seen from a bot-

tom-up perspective (although in practice, few official accounts of the 1940 debacle deny its shameful nature: the controversial issue is where to attribute the blame for a defeat of such magnitude).

The second part of *Suite française*, "Dolce," is less polemical in tone and focuses more clearly on a smaller group of people. Its title is nevertheless ironical, since it describes how the inhabitants of a village in 1941 seek accommodation with their German occupiers, and the extent to which they have to compromise patriotic duty and personal dignity in the process. Mindful perhaps of Corte's adage, the author presents fewer characters in much greater depth and makes them less schematically abject and odious. Némirovsky skillfully inserts incidental details that reveal how daily life is readjusted as the French confront their uninvited guests. Not only valuables or weapons but also worthless ornaments are concealed: "Ils avaient été donnés par une main française, regardés par des yeux français, touchés par des plumeaux de France – ils ne seraient pas souillés par le contact de l'Allemand" (235). Similarly, only the *mairie* and church clocks show German time: "[C]haque demeure française retardait ses pendules de soixante minutes, par point d'honneur" (236). On the other hand, by spring of 1941, the village shopkeepers have stock they are eager to off-load onto German soldiers. Némirovsky's manner is gently satirical, her awareness of social niceties and clan conflicts inviting comparison with Marcel Aymé or Marcel Proust.

At the center of "Dolce" is the Angellier household, comprising the domineering matriarch, Mme Angellier, and her daughter-in-law, Lucile, whose husband Gaston is a prisoner of war. When a civilized German officer, the musician Bruno von Falk, is billeted on them, Lucile is made aware of the emptiness of her emotional life and marriage (her husband keeps a mistress and child in Dijon). There is an obvious parallel to be drawn with Vercors's celebrated propaganda story *Le Silence de la mer*, although it is most unlikely that Némirovsky would have known a work that achieved a restricted, clandestine circulation in occupied France only in the period following her death; in any case, Lucile Angellier is a much more substantial

character than the mute niece of Vercors's novella. The officer tells Lucile that French occupying forces vandalized his parents' house in the First World War, breaking musical instruments and damaging books belonging to Goethe, and this, in order to emphasize his own seductive charm and restraint. Having visited a seamstress who openly keeps a German lover, Lucile rebels against the totalitarian uniformity of patriotic duty: "Je hais cet esprit communautaire dont on nous rebat les oreilles. Les Allemands, les Français, les gaullistes s'entendent tous sur un point: il faut vivre, penser, aimer avec les autres, en fonction d'un État, d'un pays, d'un parti" (346).

But if national identity is here perceived as alienating and dehumanizing, ultimately it can provide a liberating sense of purpose. In a separate plot strand, Lucile's dilemma is contrasted with the resentment felt by the peasant, Benoît Laborie, who killed two Germans while escaping from a prison camp and is "revêtu comme d'une triple armure de pudeur, masculine, paysanne et française" (258). He has resumed his nocturnal poaching in the park of the local Vicomte, who is also the village mayor and owner of the land that the Labories have farmed for generations. When his wife catches Benoît in the act, the Vicomte denounces him secretly to the Germans. Once again, however, Benoît escapes arrest, killing the German officer who has been flirting with his own wife, along with his dog. Lucile conceals Benoît in the Angelliers' house, assisted to her surprise, by Mme Angellier, who had regarded her daughter-in-law's friendship with Bruno with steely disapproval. Rejecting Bruno's advances, she dupes him into supplying her with a permit to allow her to drive Benoît to a hiding place in Paris. The novel ends with the French characters engaged in active resistance (Lucile "se sentait – ligotée – captive – solidaire de ce pays prisonnier qui soupirait tout bas d'impatience et rêvait" [373]), while the German troops depart for the Russian front, their French idyll concluded.

Had Irène Némirovsky survived to complete *Suite française*, it would no doubt have been received as a masterly contribution to the fictional representation of wartime France. Before briefly comparing this novel with recent works published by contemporary

writers, it is worth reflecting on Némirovsky's life and afterlife, and in particular her status as witness and victim. Irène was a productive and successful writer, her career having taken off in 1929 with the novel *David Golder*, which offers an unflattering portrait of Jewish financiers. Some of her work was published in right-wing journals like *Gringoire* and *Candide*, and she probably knew antisemitic authors like Jacques Chardonne and Paul Morand. Her biographer, Jonathan Weiss, argues that she aspired to be seen as a Jewish writer critical of her own community, so that her use of overtly antisemitic outlets (always eager for evidence that Jews are an alien race) is less paradoxical than it may seem (120). Nonetheless, it left her with few allies in the literary world when she herself fell victim to Vichy's systematic elimination of Jews from public life.

While it thus seems justifiable to tax Némirovsky with a certain naivety in her attitudes towards Jewish identity, in her preface to *Suite française*, Myriam Anissimov goes much further:

Décrivant l'ascension sociale des Juifs, elle fait siens toutes sortes de préjugés antisémites, et leur attribue les stéréotypes préjudiciables de l'époque. Sous sa plume surgissent des portraits de Juifs, dépeints dans les termes les plus cruels et péjoratifs, qu'elle contemple avec une sorte d'horreur fascinée, bien qu'elle reconnaisse partager avec eux une communauté de destin. (14)

The problem with this judgment is that it implies that any writing critical of Jews as individuals has succumbed to prejudices and stereotypes about Jews as a group; Weiss observes more subtly that when one encounters anti-Semitic discourse in Némirovsky's work, it belongs to biased characters rather than the narrator (127). But it is certainly true that Némirovsky shows how individuals are chained to an inescapable collective destiny, writing in "Destinées" (1940), for example, that: "[D]ans les calamités publiques, personne n'est innocent. Chacun paie pour une faute commise autrefois, oubliée. C'est comme si une race ou une classe, ou un pays donnait naissance à des monstres qui, ensuite, les écrasent" (*Dimanche* 253-54). In

the story "Fraternité" (1937), when a prosperous, assimilated French Jew, symbolically called Christian, meets a destitute foreign Jew who shares the same surname, he is made aware that for all their material differences, both belong to the same community of exiles (*Dimanche*). Yet one could extract a very similar lesson from *Suite française* about French identity: for all their class resentments and self-interested obsessions, ultimately the most admirable characters in this novel are those who accept that they belong to another oppressed community and that collective resistance is the only redeeming course of action. All of Némirovsky's work confronts the dilemma of the individual forced to subsume his or her identity under that of a group whose values seem unacceptably constricting.

Despite their forebodings, Irène and her husband's worldly success seems to have made them somewhat complacent about political issues and the dangers they were likely to face as stateless Jews in wartime France. This is certainly the thesis espoused by their younger daughter, Élisabeth Gille, in her fictionalized memoirs about her mother. Irène was deported to Auschwitz a few days after her arrest by French gendarmes in July 1942, and died a month later, probably during a typhus epidemic. Desperate to secure her release, Michel Epstein wrote obsequious letters to influential figures like the German ambassador Otto Abetz, drawing attention to his wife's unflattering portraits of Jews and communists in her books. The outcome was that he too was arrested and gassed in Auschwitz in November 1942; most other members of the family perished in the same way. The children, Denise and Élisabeth, had French nationality, but were arrested and then released thanks to a sympathetic German officer. Thereafter, they were sheltered by devoted friends and employees of the family, notably Cécile Michaud and Julie Dumot. Irène's mother, Fanny, also survived the Occupation, having had the foresight to acquire Latvian papers, but callously refused to assist her grandchildren. Élisabeth Gille writes in *Le Mirador* (1992) that Irène's father had considered emigrating to the USA in 1926 and that Michel's uncle also advised them in vain to move to America; even after the Occupation, they refused Cécile Michaud's offer to help them escape to Switzerland. Nathalie Sarraute (herself

a Russian émigrée) expressed surprise that Irène and Michel made no attempt to hide in 1942, but continued to live openly in a village surrounded by Germans (*Le Mirador*).⁸

René de Ceccatty writes in his preface to *Le Mirador* that Élisabeth Gille had no personal memory of her mother, but all the quotations attributed to Irène Némirovsky are authentic; thus “grâce à Irène, Élisabeth pourrait retrouver la parole volée, en la lui restituant: on peut dire qu’elles se redonnèrent mutuellement la parole” (17). In her postface, Gille expresses considerable resentment towards her mother for failing to escape and save the family: “Son aveuglement était criminel” (417). This is probably why in the sequel *Un Paysage de cendres*, she makes her alter ego Léa into a much more politically aware and aggressive figure than her parents. Having survived the Occupation thanks to the support of sympathetic nuns and resistance activists (but at the price of obliterating all traces of her Jewish origin), she becomes an emotionally withdrawn adolescent, who nonetheless obsessively follows war crimes trials, even creating a scandal in the courtroom by denouncing the lenient sentences given to SS members in 1953. But since “cette enfant ne savait rien d’elle-même, rien de ses origines ni de son identité. Elle n’était qu’une terre brûlée, un paysage de cendres” (185).

If Gille (or her fictional counterpart) was effectively robbed of her identity (and aspired to rediscover it through novelized autobiography), Némirovsky sought unsuccessfully to replace her Jewish or Slavic identity (with all its unacceptable alien connotations in interwar France) with that of an assimilated French bourgeois intellectual. Jonathan Weiss concludes that Némirovsky’s case “pose la question aiguë du rapport de l’identité culturelle d’un écrivain ou d’un artiste avec son identité nationale ou légale” (212). Her personal accomplishments and cultural legitimization as a French novelist ultimately were unable to protect her from exclusion from the legally recognized community of citizens and from being turned into a non-person. In this sense, her tactic of distancing herself from her immigrant origins proved futile. No doubt Némirovsky illustrates the phenomenon of what Sartre calls the “inauthentic” Jew, living in

denial and self-defeatingly striving to "se désolidariser des défauts qu'on reconnaît à sa "race" en s'en faisant le témoin objectif et le juge" (Sartre 135). On the other hand, her lack of political judgment and passivity do not invalidate her work as a novelist, since creating fiction in effect replaces engagement in the real world with a distanced, imagined refraction of the real in literature.⁹

A similar point is made in Patrick Modiano's novel *Voyage de nocces* (1990), whose theme is the fracturing of identities and personalities during and after the Occupation. A Jewish girl elopes to the unoccupied zone in order to escape arrest and deportation, unlike her father who remains in Paris after her disappearance, even placing an advertisement in a newspaper inquiring about her. But decades later, she is driven to commit suicide, overcome by a "sentiment de vide et de remords" (157). Modiano returns to a rather more austere meditation on how identities are lost or imposed in *Dora Bruder* (1997), which starts from a similar newspaper clipping, but largely drops the fictional trappings of his earlier novel. The nameless narrator's discovery in 1988 of a brief item inserted in *Paris-Soir* on December 31, 1941 requesting information about Dora Bruder, aged fifteen, stimulates him to reconstruct the biography of this girl and her family, as a sort of historical detective. His aim is partly to restore dignity and actuality to some of the forgotten victims of France's complicity in the Holocaust, yet as he notes, "Ce sont des personnages qui laissent peu de traces derrière elles. Presque des anonymes" (41).

The problem with *Dora Bruder* (at least for readers hoping for enlightenment about how ordinary Jewish people in occupied Paris struggled to survive) is that it is not a novel offering a fully-fledged imaginative reconstruction of others' lives and deaths, but an "autofiction," less interested in the figure named in the title than in the narrator's ruminations about his own identity, which overlaps closely with that of Patrick Modiano, as rehearsed in many other of his books. Whether one finds this excruciatingly narcissistic and a symptom of imaginative anorexia, or responds warmly to the author's play with generic indeterminacy, depends perhaps on one's expect-

tations of a literary work that purports to be about occupation and genocide. This is not to deny Modiano's beguiling, albeit solipsistic, talent, but rather to suggest that the documentary interest of historical novels is probably much greater when their authors follow a more traditional narrative model (posited on the existence of an objective external reality separable from the narrator's self).¹⁰

Such a model is followed in Pierre Assouline's *Lutetia* (2005), which received a glowing recommendation from Michel Tournier in *The Times Literary Supplement's* annual review of the year's best novels in December 2005. Assouline is best known as an up-market literary journalist and industrious producer of well-researched biographies. Unsurprisingly, *Lutetia* comes complete with an exhaustive bibliography of sources entitled "Reconnaissance de dettes," and is packed with fascinating detail about how the luxury hotel on the Boulevard Raspail endured the wartime years; the hotel's name fairly obviously invites us to take it as a symbol of occupied Paris. The problem with the book, however, is that Assouline sometimes seems overwhelmed by his debts to others' writings, so that his text reads like a maladroït pastiche of a historical novel, with factual data and subtle allusions having far more impact than his thinly realized characters and intermittent plot. Thus he draws on Élisabeth Gille's memoirs, showing the Epstein sisters vainly searching the hotel that was used as a holding center for returning deportees after the Liberation for traces of their mother.

What connects Némirovsky with novelists like Modiano and Assouline writing half a century after her death is their preoccupation with the forces of history, mediated through fiction, fiction used not merely for entertainment or aesthetic experimentation but in order to document individuals, events and moral issues, which are partly invented and partly based on personal observation or painstaking research. Very much like witness testimony, whose accuracy and veracity are often questionable, these novels offer "la rencontre avec une voix humaine qui a traversé l'histoire, et, de façon oblique, la vérité non des faits, mais celle plus subtile mais aussi indispensable d'une époque et d'une expérience" (Wieviorka 168). This having

been said, none of these writers qualify as witnesses according to the strictest definition whereby testimony has a quasi-legal status as "un récit à la première personne qui raconte ce que le narrateur a réellement vécu" (Suleiman 142). Nor are they obliged to follow the factual, positivist reality and professional codes of the historian. But their ethical and socio-cultural significance as guardians of memory should not be overlooked because of the problematic status of literary and fictional truth or truthfulness.

One of Assouline's closing aphorisms is that "l'excès de la mémoire tyrannise" (433): can an individual or a community or a nation ever escape from obsessive recollection of past guilt and suffering? It seems to me that historical memory ought to be seen and used as a force for good, for making good, whether symbolically or in a material sense, rights that were abused by recognizing and recording the deeds of both victims and their persecutors. The more serious end of the entertainment industry, whether one means literature, movies, television, or other media, has a role to play in this process, one that is essentially didactic. All the works studied in this essay fulfill this purpose, insofar as they leave their readers much better informed about some of the events that occurred in wartime France, as well as raising conceptual issues about how individual identity is shaped or destroyed by collective forces. Inevitably, a writer like Irène Némirovsky, who is a first-hand spectator and who has the imaginative empathy and the ambition to create an epic range of characters and events, is likely to produce work of greater substance than authors whose knowledge is second-hand or whose interests are more circumscribed. But far more readers are likely to read even a minor novel about the Hôtel Lutetia than an academic monograph on the subject; we need recognize more explicitly that novelists have made a vital contribution to our understanding of history.

NOTES

¹Hence Anne Grynberg's argument that "Sous Vichy, la répression n'est pas liée à l'urgence militaire ou politique; elle participe de la définition même du régime, elle est intrinsèquement liée à son projet idéologique, celui de la renaissance nationale dont les Juifs sont "naturellement" exclus" (96).

²Sartre noted the compliance of surviving Jews resident in France with "cette politique de l'effacement" (92).

³French reviewers cited from the official Némirovsky website, *Irène Némirovsky*.

⁴See also Bickerton.

⁵Vinen seems unaware of *Suite française*, however.

⁶Jackson cites some well-known novels by Sartre, Simon, Gracq, and Merle, as well as Clément's film *Jeux interdits* as examples. Literary historians may be interested to know that an AHRC-funded major research project based at the Universities of Durham and Leeds in the UK is being undertaken from 2006 to 2009 to investigate the whole corpus of narrative fiction about the defeat and occupation produced in France from 1940 to the present.

⁷Jonathan Weiss points out that two similar incidents were omitted from the published version of the novel. One, based on fact, described the death of a priest at the front; the other showed a group of orphans murdering a hypocritical philanthropist. Weiss says there are two versions of the manuscript of *Suite française*. It is far from clear whose editorial hand lies behind the published version. See Weiss (119 n.6 and 166). His is the most substantial study of the writer published to date, so far as I am aware.

⁸See also Gille *Un paysage*.

⁹Élisabeth Gille's decision to write novels based on her family history can no doubt be seen both as a tribute to her mother, and as a defense mechanism (since fiction allows the elimination or avoidance of painful personal details).

¹⁰For a more detailed discussion, see Lloyd.

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